

T H E

L O U N G E R.

[N° LXXV.]

Saturday, July 8. 1786.

E' troppo barbara quella legge, che vuol disporre del cuor delle donne a costo della loro rovina.

GOLDONI.

To the AUTHOR of the LOUNGER.

S I R,

Avignon, May 1786.

YOU will perhaps be surpris'd at receiving a letter from this place; but if you possess that benevolence which from your writings one is led to ascribe to you, the unfortunate from any quarter may claim some of your notice. My story, I believe, will not be without its use; and if you knew that sort of melancholy indulgence which I feel in addressing a letter to my native country! — But I will not give way to feeling, I mean simply to relate; and situated as I am, banished from the world, and lost to myself, I can tell my story,—I think I can,—as that of a third person, in which though I may be interested, I will yet be impartial.

My father possessed a small patrimonial estate in the county of —, and married, in early life, a Lady whose birth was much above her fortune, and who unluckily retained all the pride of the first, though it but ill suited the circumstances of the latter. The consequences were such as might be expected. My father was involved in an expensive style of life, which in a few years obliged him to sell his estate for payment of his debts. He did not live to feel the distresses to which he might have been reduced; and after his death, my mother took up her residence in a country-town, where the pittance that remained from the reversion of my father's effects, assisted by a small pension from government, which a distant relation of my mother's procured for us, enabled her to educate me on that sober plan which necessity had now taught her to adopt.

Our situation, however, still allowed her to mix something of the genteel in my education; and the place in which we lived was inhabited by several families, who, like us, had retired from more public and expensive life, and still retained somewhat of that polish which former intercourse with the fashionable world had conferred. At the age of seventeen, therefore, I was, I believe, tolerably accomplished; and though I knew nothing of high life, nor indeed wished to know it, yet I possessed a degree of refinement and breeding rather above what the circumstances of my mother might have been expected to allow.

Of my beauty I was, like other girls, somewhat vain; but my mother was proud to a degree. She looked upon it as a gift by which my fortune and hers were to be made, and consequently spared no possible pains to set it off to advantage. Its importance and its power were often inculcated on me; and my ambition was daily inflamed by

the recital of the wealth and station which other girls had acquired by marriages to which their beauty alone had intitled them. I think I heard those instances with more indifference than my mother wished I should; and could not easily be brought to consider all happiness as centered in riches or in rank, to which her wishes and hopes were constantly pointed.

These hopes, however, accident put it in her power to accomplish. At the house of one of the gentlest of our acquaintance (who had two daughters nearly of my age) we met with Mr M——, a gentleman whom the lady of the house introduced particularly to us, as a man of great fortune and singular worth. Mr M—— was past the meridian of life; he had the look and air of a man who had seen the world, and talked on most subjects with a degree of shrewd, and often sarcastic observation, which met with much applause from the older part of the company, but which was not at all calculated to please the younger. The enthusiasm of attachment, of feeling, and of virtue, which our reading sometimes induced us to mention, he ridiculed as existing only in the dreams of poetry, or the fanciful heroes of romance; but which sense and experience neither looked to find in others, or ventured to indulge in ourselves. In short, my companions and I hated and feared him; and neither our aversion or our fear was at all removed by the lectures of our mothers on his good sense and agreeable manners.

These lectures were at last bestowed with particular emphasis on me, and, after a day or two's preamble of general commendations, he was formally proposed to me by my mother as a husband. He himself, though he made his court chiefly to her, was now pretty sedulous in his attentions to me; and made many speeches to my beauty, and protestations of his love, which I heard with little emotion, but which my mother, and her friend whose guests we were, represented as the genuine expressions of the most sincere and ardent attachment. Of love I had formed such ideas as girls of my age generally do; and though I had no particular preference for any one else, I did not hesitate in refusing him, for whom I had hitherto conceived nothing but disgust. My refusal increased the ardour of my lover in his suit: to me he talked in common-place language of the anguish it caused him; to my mother he spoke in the language of the world, and increased his offers in point of settlement to an exorbitant degree. Her influence was proportionally exerted. She persuaded, implored, and was angry. The luxury and happiness of that state which I might acquire were warmly painted; the folly, the impiety, of depriving myself and her of so comfortable an establishment, was strongly held forth; the good qualities and generosity of Mr M—— were expatiated on; those ideas which I ventured to plead as reasons for my rejection were ridiculed and exploded.—At my time of life, unused to resistance, fond of my mother, and accustomed to be guided by her; perhaps, too, somewhat dazzled with the prospect of the situation which this marriage would open to me; it is not surprising that my first resolutions were overcome. I became the wife of Mr M——.

For some time the happiness they had promised seemed to attend me. My husband was warm, if not tender in his attachment; my wishes for myself were not only indulged, but prompted; and his kindness to my mother and my friends was unbounded. I was grate-
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ful to Mr M——, I regarded, I esteemed, I wished to love him. On the birth of a son, which happened about a year after our marriage, he redoubled his assiduities about me. I was more happy, more grateful; I looked on my boy, his father caressed him; and then it was that I loved Mr M—— indeed.

This happiness, however, it was not my good fortune long to enjoy. Some projects of political ambition, in which Mr M—— was engaged, called him from those domestic enjoyments which seemed for a while to have interested him, into more public life. We took up our residence in the capital, and Mr M—— introduced me to what is called the best company. Of his own society I soon came to enjoy but little. His attachment for me began visibly to decay, and by degrees he lost altogether the attentions which for a while outlived it. Sullen and silent when we were alone, and either neglectful or contemptuous when we had company, he treated me as one whom it would have degraded him to love or to respect; whom it was scarce worth while to hate or to despise. I was considered as merely a part of his establishment; and it was my duty to do the honours of his table, as it was that of his butler to attend to his sideboard, or of his groom to take care of his horses. Like them too, I was to minister to his vanity, by the splendour of my appearance; I was to shew that beauty of which he was master, in company and at public places, and was to carry the trappings with which he had adorned it, to be envied by the poor, and admired by the wealthy. While my affection for him continued, I sometimes remonstrated against this. His answers were first indifferent, and then peevish. Young, giddy, and fond of amusement, I at last began to enjoy the part he assigned me, and entered warmly into that round of dissipation, which for a while I had passed through without relish, and often with self-reproach. My son, who had been my tie to home, he took from me, to place him in the family of a former tutor of his own, who now kept a French academy; and I never had a second child. My society was made up of the gay and the thoughtless; women who, like me, had no duty to perform, no laudable exertion to make; but who in the bustle of idleness were to lose all thought, and in the forms of the world all honest attachment.

For a considerable time, however, a sense of right, which I had imbibed in my infancy, rose up occasionally to embitter my pleasures, and to make me ashamed of the part I was acting. Whenever Mr M—— took the trouble of perceiving this, it served him but as a subject for ridicule. The restraints of religion, or nice morality, he was at pains to represent as the effects of fanaticism and pedantry; and when I seemed surpris'd or shocked at the principles he held forth, he threw in a sneer at my former situation, and hinted, that but for him I had been still the awkward ignorant thing he found me.

Yet this man expected that I should be virtuous, as that word is used by the world; that I should guard that honour which was his, while every other principle of my own rectitude was extinguished. For a long time it was so. My horror at that degree of depravity was not to be overcome, even amidst the levity, to call it no worse, of manners which I saw continually around me, and which, as far as it was a mark of fashion, he seemed to wish me to participate. Still in the possession of youth and beauty, I did not escape solicitations; but I repelled

repelled them with a degree of resentment, which I often heard the very man whose honour it guarded treat as affectation in any woman who should pretend it. He would frequently repeat from the Letters of Lord *Chesterfield*, that a declaration of love to a woman was always to be ventured, because, even though it was rejected, she would accept of it as a compliment to her attractions. I had soon opportunities of knowing that Mr M—— was as loose in his practice as in his principles. His infidelities, indeed, he was not at much pains to conceal; and while I continued to upbraid him, was at almost as little pains to excuse.

In such circumstances, was it to be wondered at if my virtue was not always proof against the attacks to which it was exposed? With a husband unequal in years, lost to my affection, as I was cast from his, and treating me as one from whom no love or duty was to be expected; a husband whose principles were corrupt, whose conversation was loose, whose infidelity gave a sort of justice to mine; surrounded at the same time by young men whose persons were attractive, whose manners were engaging, whose obsequious attentions were contrasted with my husband's neglect, and whose pretended adoration and respect were opposed to his rudeness and contempt:—Was it wonderful, that thus situated, exposed to temptation, and unguarded by principle, I should forget first the restraints of prudence, and then the obligations of virtue?

Resigned as I now am to my situation, I can look on it as a kind interposition of Providence, that detection soon followed my first deviations from virtue, before I had lost the feelings of shame and contrition, before I had wandered an irrecoverable distance from duty, from principle, from religion. Here, in this place of banishment which the mercy of my husband allotted me, I have met with some benevolent guides, who have led me to those sources of comfort, who have given me a station in which, amidst the obloquy of the world, amidst the humiliation of repentance, I can still in some degree respect myself; who have taught me to cultivate my mind, to improve its powers, to regulate its principles; who have led me to a juster value of this life, to a sincere hope of the next.

Humbled, and I trust improved by affliction, I will not indulge either vindication or resentment; the injuries I have done my husband I am willing to expiate by penitence and by suffering; yet for his own sake, and for the warning of others, let me ask him, If, for these injuries to him, and sufferings to me, he never imputes any blame to himself? I am told he is loud in his charges of my ingratitude and perfidy. I again repeat, that I will not offer to apologise for my weakness or my crimes. But it would be more dignified in him, as well as more just, were he to forget rather than to reproach the woman whose person he bought, whose affections he despised, whose innocence he corrupted,—whose ruin he has caused!

SOPHIA M——.

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